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Sino-Soviet Border Talks: Problems and Prospects

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
10 November 1969

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Sino-Soviet Border Talks: Problems and Prospects

Summary

When the Sino-Soviet border talks opened in Peking on 20 October, the two sides came to the table with different objectives and points of view. As a result, there has been difficulty in agreeing on what to talk about, and the initial three weeks of negotiation apparently have failed to produce noticeable progress. Nevertheless, by agreeing to talk at all, the two countries have clearly shown a desire to turn away from the collision course on which they were earlier embarked. The motivation of the Chinese is simple: the desire to prevent a possible Soviet attack. Mounting Soviet diplomatic and military pressure has forced Peking to seek an easing of tensions through negotiation. The Russians, for their part, believe that others have taken advantage of their preoccupation with the Chinese problem and want relief from the harassment, uncertainty, and political embarrassment that the tense situation on the border has caused them.

Ironically, one thing these talks almost certainly cannot achieve is settlement of the long-standing Sino-Soviet border dispute. Although some historic territorial claims are involved, the dispute, in its broadest sense, is part and parcel of Peking's current bitter rivalry with Moscow. Peking has no intention of abandoning its claim to some 600,000 square miles of Soviet Siberia, a political rather than a territorial issue that the Chinese

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates, the Office of Strategic Research, and the Office of Basic Geographic Intelligence.

have been effectively exploiting for six years. Both sides, however, may now be ready to agree to disagree on this broad and intractable issue and move on to other issues where some accord is possible. The Soviets are clearly anxious to bring about some improvements in state relations and appear willing to make some compromises on areas in dispute along the border. The Chinese, in a position of relative weakness, may be ready to improve their state relations with the USSR and possibly to compromise on the question of border demarcation in certain disputed areas. Any positive results would provide at least short-term relief from the tension of recent months and avert new, more serious military actions across the Sino-Soviet border.

Territorial Issues--Real and Otherwise

1. A major block to any effort to ease border tensions has been the "unequal" treaties impasse, a political rather than territorial issue that grew out of propaganda-sparring between Moscow and Peking after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. In countering Chinese criticism of his withdrawal of Russian missiles, Soviet Premier Khrushchev, in December 1962, chided the Chinese for their continued acceptance of "colonial outhouses" in Hong Kong and Macao. Peking responded by reminding Khrushchev that Czarist Russia had been an eager participant in the annexation of Chinese territory and suggested that a substantial chunk of Soviet Siberia could be added to the list of colonial enclaves tolerated by China. Since then, this issue has become a matter of deepest principle and national prestige for both sides.

2. The Chinese polemicists cite three 19th century treaties under which Russia acquired some 590,000 square miles of territory that had been under the nominal control or domination of Manchu China. The Chinese contend that these "unequal treaties" were invalidated by Lenin in 1920 when the new Soviet government renounced "all seizure of Chinese territory and all the Russian concessions in China." Peking also contends that this renunciation was incorporated in the Sino-Soviet agreement of 1924, which stipulated the annulment of "all conventions, agreements, treaties, protocols, contracts, etc., concluded between the government of China and the Tsarist Government..." Moscow has flatly rejected these contentions, arguing that the boundary treaties were the results of historical developments, that they were freely arrived at between representatives of imperial Russia and imperial China, and, that they, therefore, remain valid. The Soviets assert that all the "unequal treaties" were eliminated in 1920 and 1924 and that no document of the Soviet state or any statement by Lenin ever qualified the border treaties with China as unequal or subject to revision. According to the Russians, there is no "territorial issue" between the USSR and China, but only a matter of defining the few specific areas in which there is not a clear or agreed demarcation of the border.

3. Although it does not incorporate a serious Chinese territorial claim, the "unequal" treaties issue has become an integral part of Peking's ideological and political challenge of Moscow. The Chinese have considered the Russians particularly vulnerable to attack on this subject, pointing to Soviet defense of the 19th century treaties as proof of Moscow's "revisionism" and "social-imperialist" character. As a result, Peking has continued to maintain that any final settlement of Sino-Soviet border differences will require the negotiation of a new, "equal" treaty. Disavowing any intention of actually regaining territory lost to imperial Russia, the Chinese have consistently stated their willingness to accept the existing frontier as the basis for a permanent border demarcation, provided that Moscow first acknowledge the 19th century treaties establishing it as "unequal." The Soviets, largely for reasons of national prestige, are unwilling to make such a concession. Even if new "equal" treaties were signed confirming Soviet possession of the Far Eastern territory, a Soviet admission that the old treaties had been unequal would give the appearance that the territory had come to Moscow only through Peking's generosity. This is a circumstance Moscow clearly finds unacceptable, although the Soviets might be amenable to some compromise wording that would allow for a differing interpretation by each side.

4. Another factor probably affecting Moscow's calculations is that most of Russia's borders were determined in a no more equitable manner than was the one with China. Thus admission of the "unequal" nature of the border agreements with China could conceivably lead to agitation on the part of others who adjoin the USSR. In particular, it could aid Japan's frequently stated case for the return of territories seized by the Russians at the end of World War II--an argument Moscow already finds vexatious.

5. Aside from the unequal treaties issue, with all of its political and ideological baggage, Peking has some specific, more limited territorial claims against the USSR that are perhaps more open to settlement. Along the eastern sector of the frontier these claims are mostly directed toward the more

Chen-Pao (Damansky) Island: A Chinese photograph demonstrating Peking's contention that the river's main channel (arrow) places the island on China's side (left side of photograph) of the border.

than 700 islands in the Amur and Ussuri border rivers. Peking charges that, even in violation of the unequal treaty, the Russians are occupying a large number of Chinese islands—for example, Chen Pao (Damansky), where fighting broke out last spring. By far the most important of the islands is Hei-hsia-tzu, a Soviet controlled 25 mile-long strip of land at the Amur-Ussuri confluence that dominates the major city of Khabarovsk.

6. The treaties establishing this sector of the frontier refer to territories on the left and right bank, but never to the river itself. Under such circumstances, one of two alternatives is usually accepted under international law: either the line of the channel or the median line of the stream becomes the boundary. The former is most often used if the river is navigable, the latter if it is not.

7. The Chinese base their claim to the islands on both these principles of international law. The Soviets assert, however, that the Sino-Soviet border in most instances runs along the Chinese side of the river. The Soviet version of the frontier is not based on the wording of any treaty, but on an al-

leged map that accompanies the border treaty of 1860. The Chinese argue that the map--which the Soviets have chosen not to produce--is too small in scale to show accurately either the river boundary or island ownership.

8. The Soviet Union's refusal to accept either the main-channel or median-line principle for determining the border is clearly related to Russian determination to hold Hei-hsia-tzu Island. The Chinese say that the frontier follows the main Amur River channel to Khabarovsk, while the Soviets contend that the boundary is marked by a minor channel of the Amur more distant from the city. If Peking's claim were accepted, the Chinese would be virtually only a stone's throw from the center of Khabarovsk--a condition completely unacceptable to Moscow. There are also two smaller Soviet-occupied areas along the eastern sector that are claimed by Peking: 375 square miles of territory near the border town of Manchouli in western Manchuria, and a section on the Soviet side of the Amur river opposite northern Manchuria. Neither area has been mentioned recently by Peking, but both are still officially in dispute.

9. In the western sector, the only area in dispute is approximately 8,000 square miles of mountain waste in the Pamir range along China's extreme southwest frontier. Peking contends that Russian troops occupied this area in 1892 in violation of the Sino-Russian boundary protocol of 1884. The Soviets claim the area as a result of the Anglo-Russian treaty of 1895--an agreement made without China's approval.

10. These areas of specific dispute have always been a source of friction, especially since the two sides began exchanging propaganda accusations over the border in 1963. Subsequently, minor incidents involving gunfire and other "provocations" have apparently occurred with some frequency along the frontier, although both sides acted with restraint to keep the situation under control. This pattern of unpublicized and contained tension was abruptly changed on 2 March 1969, however, by the large-scale clash on the Ussuri--a confrontation that inaugurated seven months of overt border conflict.

[redacted]

"We must not show the slightist timidity before a wild beast."

Mao Tse-tung
10 June 1969

"People of all countries, unite and oppose any war of aggression launched by imperialism or social-imperialism, especially one in which atom bombs are used as weapons..."

Chinese National Day slogan
29 September 1969

Confrontation on the Border: Peking Flinches

11. The beginning of border talks in Peking on 20 October marked the end of China's retreat from determined and aggressive exploitation of the border dispute to a position of defensive concern--a movement suggested by the contrasting tone of the above Chinese statements. The precise circumstances surrounding the initial clash on the Ussuri River in March 1969 will probably never be known. It seems very likely, however, that both the clash and the subsequent seven months of conflict were prompted in large part by the more aggressive and provocative Chinese moves on the border problem that followed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

12. The Soviet intervention afforded Peking new opportunities to attack the USSR as an aggressive and "revisionist" power. Exploitation of Sino-Soviet border tension was an ideal method for the Chinese to portray Moscow as an unreliable ally menacing all socialist states; to this end the Chinese began to publicize widely the Russian military activity and air intrusions along the Sino-Soviet frontier. More importantly, the Chinese probably also believed a more provocative stance on the frontier was necessary in order to offset their own weak position. Beginning in late 1965, the Russians had steadily increased their forces near the Sino-Soviet border, as well as in Mongolia. By early 1968, the Soviets had massed some 25 to 30 divisions and air and missile units in the frontier area--twice the number in 1965.

13. Peking, faced with this increasing Soviet military power along the border and virtually naked of international support, must have viewed with alarm the application of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" to Czechoslovakia and, in Chinese eyes, its implications for China. Although Peking almost certainly did not fear direct Soviet invasion it must have interpreted the "Brezhnev Doctrine" as an indication of Soviet readiness to step up political and military pressure against China. Given these attitudes, China's strong action on the Ussuri and its eagerness to exploit the resulting tension appear to have been a distinctly Maoist method of deterrence. By assuming a hard-line posture, Peking was demonstrating to Russia that despite its preoccupation with internal problems it was determined to resist Soviet pressures and to defend China's territorial rights, while at the same time calling world attention to the Soviet "threat." As an additional benefit, the Chinese could make use of escalated tension with Moscow to foster internal unity and create a properly militant atmosphere in which to implement the regime's newest domestic social and economic programs.

14. Throughout the spring and early summer, Peking maintained a truculent line on the border conflict, seizing on alleged border provocations by the "new tsars" in Moscow in order to drive home its case and to play on Moscow's current preoccupation with Eastern Europe. In his report to the ninth party congress in April, Lin Piao revealed that shortly after the initial Ussuri clashes Peking had refused to accept a telephone call from the Soviet leadership regarding the tense situation. The following month the Chinese released a lengthy reply to earlier Soviet proposals for talks that was clearly timed to undercut Moscow's position in the dispute on the eve of the World Communist Conference in Moscow. The statement predictably placed full onus on the Russians for the border conflict and reiterated the rigid Chinese demand that Moscow recognize that the present frontier was based on "unequal treaties."

15. By mid-summer, however, there was mounting evidence that the Chinese were becoming less confident of their ability to compete successfully in this war of nerves and were rethinking their general position. Moscow had shown no sign of backing away from the border conflict. On the contrary, it had become increasingly obdurate, mounting a sustained campaign of political and military pressure designed to force Peking to the conference table without preconditions.

16. Following the second Usuri clash on 15 March, in which the Soviets claim to have inflicted hundreds of casualties on the Chinese, Moscow implemented its policy of pressing for talks while at the same time displaying its intention to respond in the strongest manner feasible to any provocations. Soviet protests over the continuing border clashes contained hints of military action against China; and prominent Soviet leaders, such as party chief Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Gromyko, publicly attacked Mao and his regime. By late-summer, Soviet pressure took a more ominous turn. Soviet officials began soliciting reactions to the possibility of Sino-Soviet hostilities, including a Soviet pre-emptive strike against China's atomic installations. Obviously with the intention that Peking should learn its contents, the Soviets also sent a letter to the Australian Communist Party hinting strongly that more severe military measures were being contemplated.

17. The Chinese at this point dropped their earlier intransigent position and promptly began serious discussions at the border river navigation talks at Khabarovsk—a flip-flop that seemed to signal a Chinese decision to back away from all-out confrontation with Moscow. At the same time diplomatic sources began to report expressions of concern by Chou En-lai and other Chinese officials over Soviet military intentions; Chinese propaganda focused less and less on China's territorial case against Moscow and more and more on the details of Moscow's military buildup and its nuclear saber-rattling. Moreover, as in the fall of 1965 when Peking feared expansion of the Vietnam war, standard domestic propaganda on war preparations, began increasingly to reflect a real fear of Soviet attack.

"As I was saying in 1964..."

Kosygin and Chou En-lai at Peking Airport, 11 September 1969

18. This new attitude of the Chinese opened the way for Premier Kosygin's unprecedented flying trip to Peking on 11 September, which was clearly intended by Moscow to provide the final nudge toward negotiations on the border issue. Whatever the thrust of Kosygin's remarks to Chou En-lai at the Peking airport, stern or conciliatory, they had the desired effect. On 7 October, Peking formally announced that the Chinese would meet with the Russians. The Chinese statement, while obviously attempting to strengthen China's case, abandoned the contention that discussions to ease the border conflict would require Moscow's prior recognition that the present boundary was based on "unequal treaties." Although a Chinese position paper on the border released the following day reiterated Peking's argument that a final, over-all settlement would require such an acknowledgement, it could not disguise Peking's retreat--the Chinese had agreed to border talks on Soviet terms.

What Is There To Talk About?

19. Moscow and Peking have come to the conference table with different outlooks and objectives, and the two sides have had difficulty in deciding what to talk about. Moscow, judging that it presently enjoys both political and military advantage over the Chinese, is pressing for a settlement that would in effect remove the border problem from the list of fundamental Sino-Soviet differences. Although there might well be circumstances in which the Soviets could find the unsettled border problem with

China useful, they are obviously pressing for a settlement of the contentious issue at this time. Peking's aim is far more limited: the prevention of war, with a minimum compromise of Chinese territorial and political claims. There has been no sign of Chinese readiness to arrive at a far-reaching agreement on Soviet terms.

20. Presently, the talks appear blocked by the Chinese contention that the negotiation of substantive issues should be preceded by agreement on interim steps to cool down the dangerous situation on the border. In its statement of 7 October agreeing to the talks, Peking specifically emphasized military disengagement in "disputed areas." Firm agreement on an end to hostilities along the frontier would probably satisfy most of China's objectives in the talks. The Chinese would create the impression of becoming more reasonable, and the threat of more serious conflict would be greatly reduced--all without jeopardy to Peking's political and territorial claims. The Russians, however, are reportedly reluctant to accept such a limited tactical accord without broader agreement on specific territorial differences. They will certainly raise the question of border demarcation in disputed areas such as the Amur and Ussuri River islands, where fighting broke out last spring. Progress on this sticky and now emotional issue, however, will be difficult. Much will depend on how hard Moscow presses and on what degree of bluff, if any, the Chinese see in the Soviet position.

21. At this point Peking could choose to adopt an intransigent position, insisting that Moscow meet its demands on the "unequal treaty" issue before further steps are taken. On balance, however, it seems unlikely that the Chinese will allow these talks to break down in acrimony. Peking's presence at the talks is eloquent testimony of its concern over Soviet intentions, and the Chinese must consider that the adoption of a totally uncompromising position would provide Moscow with a perfect opportunity for resorting to harsher military measures.

22. Indeed, Peking may believe it is necessary to compromise some of its specific territorial claims in order to keep the talks going and diminish Soviet pressure. In this respect, the question of Hei-hsia-tzu island will undoubtedly be central to any agreement. The Soviet legal claim to this strategically important island is practically nonexistent, but Moscow has made it clear that Soviet possession of the island is not negotiable. The Russians conceivably might be willing to accept Peking's claims to other less important areas if the Chinese formally cede Hei-hsia-tzu to them. Moscow, for example, could agree to abide by the "main channel" formula in other stretches of the Amur and Ussuri rivers. Such an agreement would give China possession of most of the disputed river islands, including Chen Pao (Damansky) island, where the current trouble all started--a propaganda victory that might make compromises more palatable to the Chinese.

23. Surrendering their claim to Damansky after the events of March would be an extremely bitter pill for the Soviets to swallow. Nevertheless, they have expressed a willingness to consider "mutual concessions" and local conditions in negotiations over the disputed territory. This suggests that in order to remove a contentious issue they would be willing to surrender some pieces of real estate that are of little value to them; Damansky, as well as most of the Ussuri islands, seems to have little strategic or economic importance to the Russians. Early reports on the progress of the talks, in fact, claim that the Soviets appear most flexible on the subject of these islands. Even if agreement is reached on such territorial adjustments, however, there seems no chance that the revisions would be incorporated in a new treaty redefining the entire border. In agreeing to the current talks Peking served notice on Moscow that a final settlement will still require Moscow's acknowledgement of the "unequal" treaties and the negotiation of a new "equal" treaty. The Chinese have successfully exploited this artificial territorial issue for six years and clearly intend to keep it alive for use in future polemics.

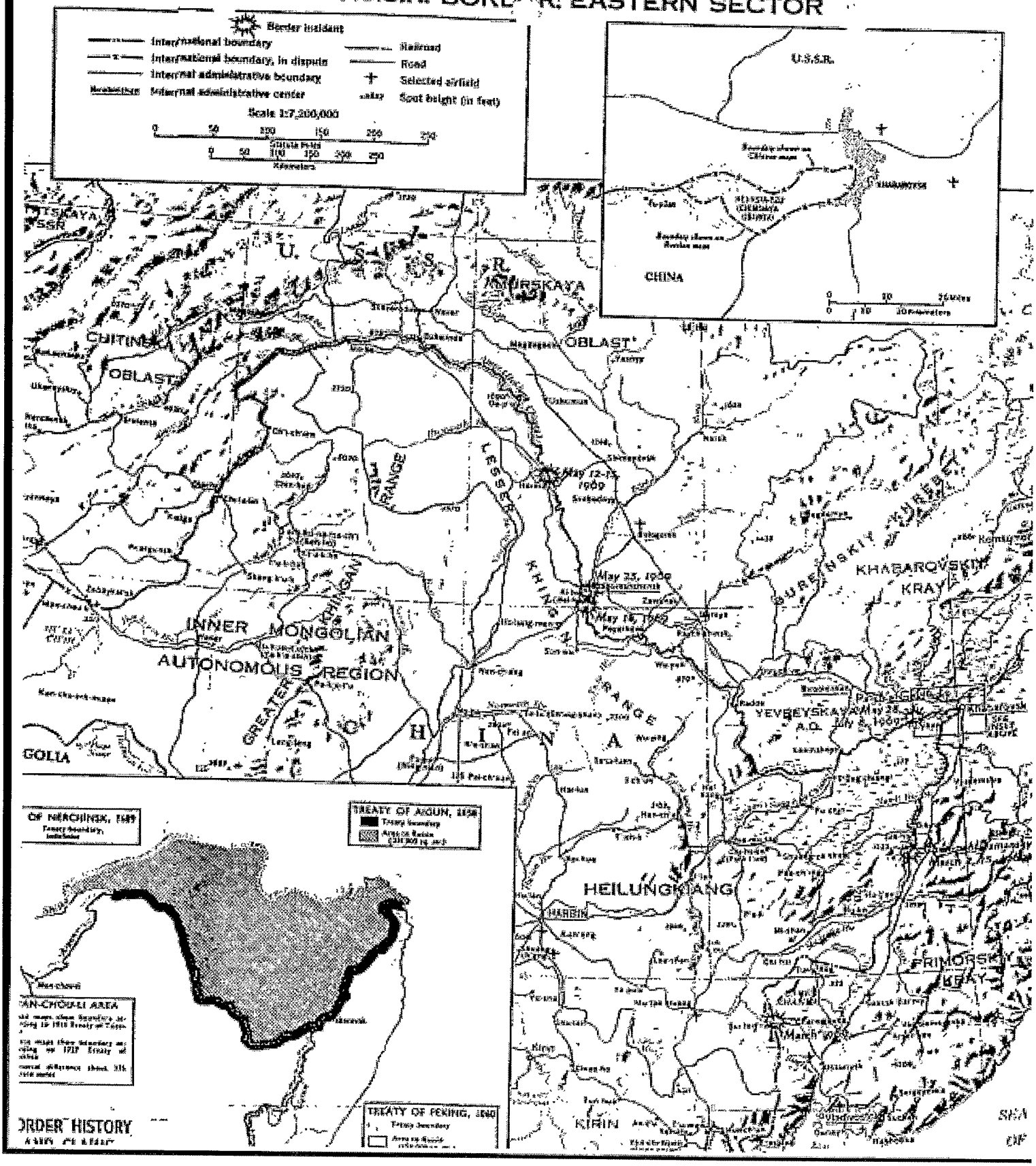
24. Aside from some progress in resolving the specific question of border demarcation, the talks may well lead to some degree of improvement in state relations. The Soviets have long believed that both their friends and foes have taken advantage of their preoccupation with the critical state of relations with China and would like to relieve some of the more obvious aspects of Sino-Soviet enmity. During his meeting with Chou En-lai on 11 September, Kosygin is reported to have proposed a return of ambassadors and an expansion of trade, and the TASS statement announcing the beginning of the current talks implied that Moscow expects issues other than the borders to be taken up. Further evidence of this expectation may be the assignment of First Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznetsov to handle the talks instead of a lower level official who had been specifically designated to head the Soviet delegation when Moscow recommended border talks last June. The Russians could have only been encouraged by Peking's statement of 7 October, which clearly opened the door for some movement in this area. The Chinese emphasized that their ideological differences with Moscow should not prevent improvement in state-to-state relations, which they added, should be conducted under the "five principles of peaceful coexistence"--the first time the formulation had been employed in this connection in recent years.

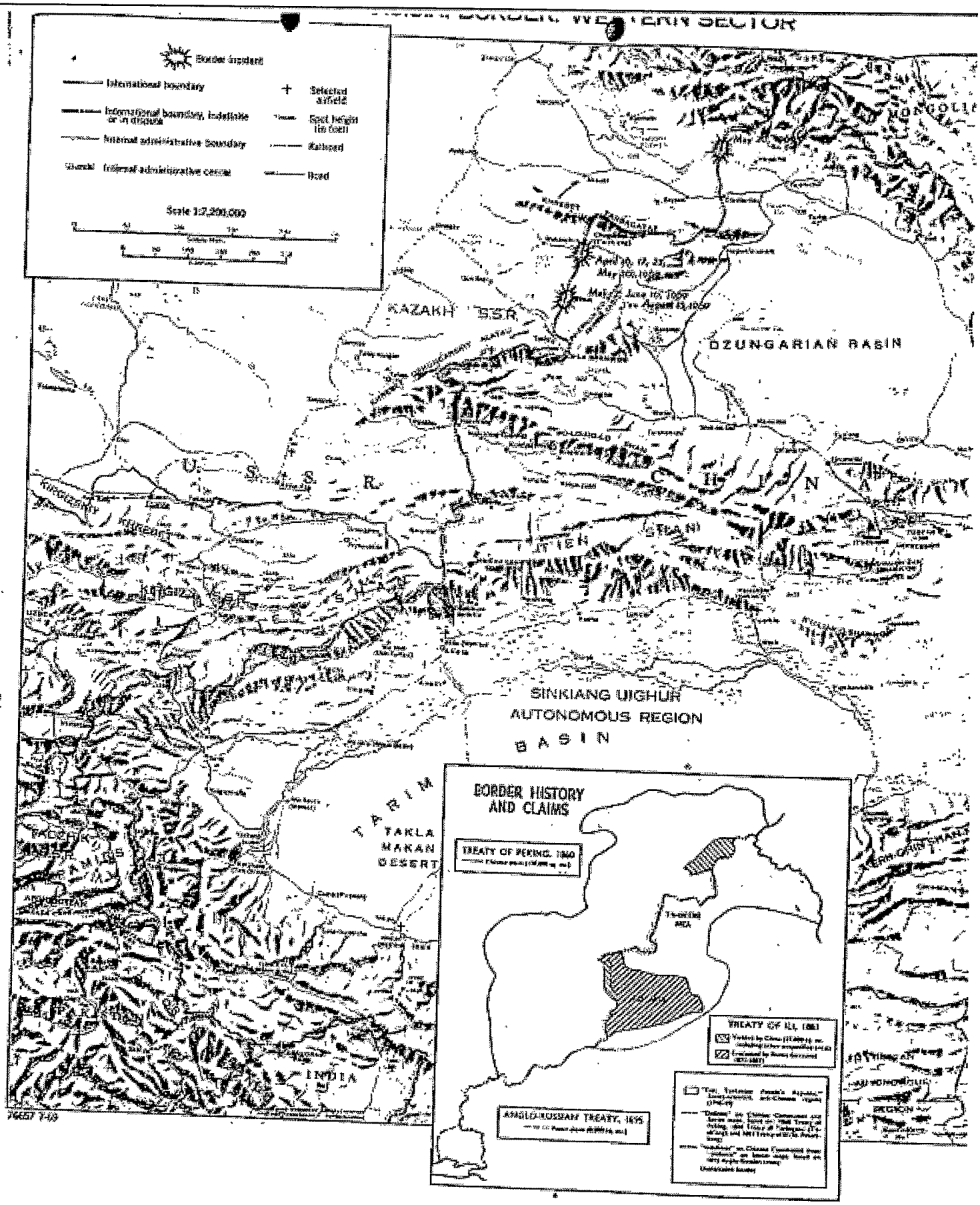
25. All of this suggests that the Chinese intend to use the prospect of improved state relations as a major bargaining tool in maneuvering away from possible serious military confrontation with the USSR. Chinese acceptance of the steps proposed by Kosygin would in no way compromise their ideological position or significantly interfere with Peking's expressed intention to continue polemical warfare against Soviet "revisionism." On the other hand, an agreement to improve state relations would conveniently paper over failure to achieve broad resolution of the border dispute.

26. In sum, the talks are likely to result in practical steps--such as a standdown of provocative military activity in the immediate border area and, possibly, territorial adjustment--that will

minimize the chance of further conflict. Such a closing out of the dangerous situation of the past seven months would probably be symbolically marked by some degree of improvement in state relations--perhaps to the cold but correct status prevailing before the Cultural Revolution. Even if the talks were to drag on almost indefinitely, their very existence could create a climate in which these developments could take place. A tactical accord, however, would in no way ease the fundamental political and ideological differences separating the two sides. The past seven months of border conflict have further increased the basic suspicion and hostility between Peking and Moscow; real Sino-Soviet rapprochement appears as far away as ever.

CHINA-U.S.S.R. BORDER: EASTERN SECTOR




Border incident
International boundary
International boundary, indefinite or in dispute
Internal administrative boundary
Internal administrative center
Selected airfield
Spot height (in feet)
Railroad
Road
Scale 1:2,200,000
KAZAKH SSR
DZUNGARIAN BASIN
U. S. S. R.
SINKIANG UIGHUR
AUTONOMOUS REGION
BASIN
TARIM
TAKLA
MAKAN
DESERT
INDIA
BORDER HISTORY
AND CLAIMS
TREATY OF PEKING, 1860
TREATY OF ILI, 1881
ANGLO-RUSSIAN TREATY, 1895

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